TO HEAR BETTER

Mark 7:31-37

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It is virtually impossible for me even to think about deafness without recalling my grandfather who, quite unintentionally, taught me about the complexity of the topic. He was very hard of hearing. He used to sit beside his radio, which was always blaring, and when I visited him I would have to shout in order to be heard. And yet he had the uncanny ability somehow to select -- out of the cacophony of sound -- what he wished to hear. He could pick up anything he wanted to hear -- with the power of those irritatingly marvelous directional microphones which bring the football players' grunting and John McEnroe's murmuring into our living rooms: particularly something not intended for his hearing. I have ever since regarded the phenomenon of hearing with great respect and careful uncertainty.

That respect and uncertainty have been enhanced pastorally. The first time I visited a patient in the recovery room after open heart surgery, confronting that astonishing array of technological devices and a man obviously hovering somewhere around the fine line between life and death, I was not sure what to do or say, and so I repeated the 23rd Psalm and prayed briefly, certain that God had heard and that the patient had not. Two days later when I came through the door for a return visit, he greeted me by saying-- "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" -- He had heard!

Hearing -- To Hear Better. It is much, much more than stimulus and neurological response. It is that, of course. It is that magnificent, tiny arrangement of nerves, membrane and bone you and I carry around deep inside our ears. But it involves the will as well: heart, mind and spirit. It is our personal contact with the rest of creation, and it is an opening on occasion to the Holy, the good, the beautiful...Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote, about a Beethoven Symphony...

> "Sweet sounds, oh, beautiful music, do not cease!
> "Reject me not into the world again."

When the ability to hear is absent we are cut off, alone: when it is absent we are demeaned, negated, denied..."Why can't you hear me? Won't somebody listen to what I'm saying?"

Jesus restored a man's ability to hear and to speak one time. The incident occurs early in the Gospel according to Mark, the first account of his ministry to have been written. He used two common folk remedies of the day, known to have been employed by other healers: he placed his fingers in the man's ears, and touched the man's tongue with his own saliva, Mark is clinically careful to tell us. The crowd is astonished at the result. There is a nuance here, however. It was not the healing alone that produced astonishment in the people observing him. Rather, Mark assumes that his readers know the scripture and will automatically understand that the people who saw this incident identified it with a scriptural promise that they had been repeating by memory since childhood...

"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped: then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing for joy."

(Isaiah 35:5,6)

That compellingly beautiful vision of God's kingdom was written centuries before by the prophet Isaiah. In times of oppression, military occupation and humiliation the old promises of God's kingdom coming into the world were terribly important to them.

Part of the restored wholeness which happens when the Kingdom of God is present is that people will see and hear and speak clearly. When Mark relates these stores of Jesus healing blind, deaf and dumb people, he wants his readers to notice and be astonished, not at the wonderful miracles alone, but at what these signs are pointing to -- namely the presence of God's Kingdom on earth in Jesus Christ. In Christ, Mark is proclaiming, a new thing -- a new way of being is going to happen: people are going to see one another as if for the first time, and hear one another with uncluttered clarity, and speak with one another with simplicity and respect and plainness.

It always requires a bit of a miracle for people actually to hear one another. The first and fundamental communication skill is learning to be quiet and to listen. What a rude awakening to learn in seminary that as counselors we did not have solutions to people's problems, that the solutions we thought we did have were probably wrong, and furthermore, that the act of dispensing solutions like a 25 year old spiritual guru was detrimental to the healing process. What we had to learn was to shut up and listen. It was not easy. It is not easy. Most of us are relentless problem solvers. Spread out before us a personal dilemma and our instinct is to offer tidbits of advice on how to resolve it, or at least tidy it up a bit. When someone expresses anxiety we are almost compulsive about assuring them that things are not that bad and will turn out OK. When someone haltingly, hesitantly tells us about a relational problem, we are quick to prescribe a book, a technique, something to do. But on those graceful occasions when the miracle happened -- when we heard: we discovered that what was required, what really was needed, what love demanded, was not sage advice, but active listening. That's what it's like in God's Kingdom.

Sometimes we don't hear because we don't want to hear. One of the most discouraging developments in the 70's was that the people who were most vociferous in demanding the right to be heard, shouted down voices which advocated positions different from their own. Nothing is more descriptive of the human condition than people gathering under the banner of freedom of speech, denying the right to be heard to others. One of our wisest commentators, Hugh T. Kerr, in a delightful editorial in Theology Today, wrote: "The failure to communicate is not a problem (that will be) solved by better media. We have more media than we know what to do with. Our problem is that so many of us don't want to communicate in the first place, partly because we have nothing to say to each other and partly because everybody seems too mad." (Our Life in God's Light. P137)

We do select what we hear. My grandfather did. You and I choose not to hear all the sounds that strike our hearing apparatus. It's a necessary device. The first response to sound amplification is always anxiety. More volume isn't the only

solution. There is a delightful George Eliot line about being able to "hear the grass grow and the squirrel's heartbeat and dying of the roar." (See F. Craddock, Overhearing the Gospel, P27).

But sometimes we don't hear because we don't like who's doing the talking, or because we can't be bothered. The obsessive concentration on the self -- self awareness, self realization, self expression -- of the past decade gave us a philosophis rationale for not hearing what we don't want to hear. The New Narcissism told us that our own voice was the only one that mattered; that what we had to say must be said, shouted if necessary, not on the basis of any intrinsic merit, but simply because it was ours. No matter how inane, unintelligible or selfish, an idea is worth expressing in the marketplace of ideas simply because it belongs to us.

Fritz Pearls wrote a defiant little poem which expresses the incredible arrogance of that sentiment...

> "I do my thing and you do your thing.
> I am not in this world to live up to your expectations,
> And you are not in this world to live up to mine.
> You are you and I am I:
> If by chance we find each other, it's beautiful.
> If not, it can't be helped."

The trouble is, it can be helped. In Christ we can find one another, regardless of what is separating us. But if that rhetoric is our credo, there is no possibility of communication, of being heard by anyone.

The present malaise was anticipated a century ago by Henrik Ibsen: In one of his plays the director of what used to be called an "Insane Asylum" is explaing that "the inmates are there because outside they cannot be themselves." He says:

> "Here we are ourselves with a vengeance. Ourselves and nothing but ourselves. We go full steam through life under the pressure of self. Each one shuts himself up in the cask of self. Sinks to the bottom by self-fermentation -- and seasons in the well of self. No one here weeps for the woes of others. No one here listens to anyone else's ideas."
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> (See Rollo May. Freedom and Destiny, P143.)

Sometimes we choose not to hear because of deeply felt religious convictions. To know the absolute truth is always to have difficulty hearing a different position. It's not the brand of morality of the Moral Majority that bothers me so much as the absolute certainty that any other position is immoral. Religious fanaticism always carries within it the seeds of tragedy because it cannot tolerate alternative points of view. How sad that the most dangerous and violent people in this dangerous and violent time are often the most devoutly religious.

Paul Tournier once observed, "Nothing is more dangerous than to believe ourselves authentic interpreters of the divine will. This is the source of all brutal intolerance and fanaticism." (The Violence Within, P29.)

It is a denial of one's very identity not to be heard. In the middle of a conversation it becomes evident that the person with whom you are talking isn't

listening to you at all. And it is experienced as an assault on your personhood. Not to be heard is to be told that you don't count, you don't matter, you don't exist.

In God's Kingdom everybody matters -- everybody counts. In Christ, the miracle of hearing happens because every person is valued.

The miracle of hearing begins when we start listening to the silences. The mystics have always known that in silence one hears a whole new symphony of sound. The late Thomas Merton wrote: "If you go into solitude with a silent heart, the silence of creation will speak louder than the tongues of men and angels." (No Man is an Island, P91.) We busy westerners have much to learn from an older wisdom in this respect..."The Lord is in his holy temple...let all the earth keep silence." Luther Standing Bear, describing his childhood as an Oglala Dakotan in the 1870's, wrote that children were taught to sit still and enjoy the silence. They were taught to use their organs of smell, to look when seemingly there was nothing to see and to listen intently when all was seemingly quiet." (Rollo May, Freedom and Destiny, P165.)

British sculptor, Henry Moore, says over and over that in order to appreciate his work one must learn to look at the spaces as well as the forms: that the emptiness between the shapes is an integral part of the art.

Modern American Composer, John Cage, gave a concert in New York once in which he took the stage, sat at the piano bench for a period of time and didn't play a note. His purpose, he explained to his surprised and irritated audience, was to give them an opportunity to "listen to the silence." Rollo May says of John Cage: He "sharpens our awareness, makes our senses keener and renders us alive to ourselves and our surroundings. Listening is our most neglected sense." (Rollo May, Ibid., P166.)

It is helpful to recall that the saints and the mystics across the centuries taught that praying, for instance, is not so much saying words to God, as it is listening to the world. Prayer, someone wrote recently, is being useless in God's presence. God speaks, not in the sonorous voices of a Hollywood movie portrayal, but through the creation, in sounds and silences; in the voices of people -- singing Hallelujah choruses, laughing, weeping: and in inner voices, audible only when we listen to silence.

It is always a miracle to hear clearly. It begins when we discover the silence. It continues as we understand that listening is a way of loving. Hearing what another says is a way of affirming that person, acknowledging and celebrating that person's worth, loving that person in the most creative and life-giving way of all. What a great gift of love it is to listen to, to hear -- our spouses, our children, our parents -- those we are most inclined not to hear...our friends, our employers, our employees, our adversaries, our enemies.

What a rare and redeeming and life-giving gift it would be if we Christians would show the world that, in Christ, we have learned to communicate with one another because we know how to listen...if we could hear one another instead of shouting, bludgeoning one another, with our version of God's truth on the subject of abortion for instance. What a gift if shared faith in Christ could somehow allow the understandably angry and frightened people of South Africa to hear one another. It seemed this week as if it might be starting -- and yet one of us, The Reverend Allan Boesak

President of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, has been in solitary confinement for two weeks. This A.M., James Reston cited Alan Paton's wonderful words about the power of love and compassion as the only hopeful power in South Africa and concluded..."Maybe some people are beginning to listen." What a gift if God's people could show the world how to listen...What a miracle of grace if the people who call Christ their Lord in Belfast would stop shouting their bigoted slogans at one another and listen to the deeply felt and legitimate fears each is feeling.

What a lesson in grace the church needs to teach the world. We need to show the world the miracle of hearing. When women say to us that our language, our titles, our organizations, make them feel less than whole, we need to hear that and stop telling them that it is inappropriate for them to feel the way they feel. We need to listen to brothers and sisters in Third World nations who are finding ways to express the fear and the rage they have been experiencing for years instead of withdrawing because we don't like their language or are uncomfortable with their demands. We need to hear, to nurture, to welcome the impatient voices of our own young, to listen through the oversimplifications, the naivete to the strong hope and optimism about the future which they offer us.

The miracle of hearing happens when we learn to listen to the silence, and when we learn that we love others by listening to them. The miracle happens when we acknowledge the simple fact that without help we don't hear much. In order to hear better we have to want to hear better, acknowledge that we need to hear better, confess our deafness. That man in this text surely wanted to hear and speak and desperately so. The blind man -- to whom Jesus restored sight -- knew his blindness and wanted desperately to see. The woman who reached out of a crowd to touch his robe knew her alienation and wanted desperately to be whole again.

A perceptive analyst of the contemporary church, Fred Craddock, writes: "Those who hunger and thirst shall be filled. If it is the nature of grace that it can enter only empty space, then those who are never empty must in the most tragic sense always be empty." (op. cit., P33.)

We are, each of us, a little deaf; a little too wrapped up in our own concerns to hear others. That needs to be confessed, acknowledged before God and one another. And we are, many of us, deaf and blind to God's love for us -- simply because we do not feel worthy, of value to God, deserving of God's attention.

I continue to discover the good news of the Gospel is for us. It is that, prior to the miracle of hearing Christ gives to those who ask, there is another miracle, the fundamental miracle. Each one is heard. You and I are loved and valued and, therefore, heard: our prayers are heard, but so is our laughter, our tears, our desperate curses, our cries of pain, ecstasies, anger; our shouts of victory, our whispers of love -- all are heard by one who values us intimately and infinitely.

As we are heard and as we hear one another, God's Kingdom comes on earth. Thanks be to God.

Give us the gift, Lord God, in Jesus Christ our Lord of love, hear us. Hear our joy and our sorrow. Hear our victories and our fears: hear our great love of life and the world and other people -- and hear our doubts -- our concerns -- our worries...Hear us -- and in Jesus Christ give us grace to listen to one another... Give us the grace of silence: the discipline to be silent -- to be quiet in your presence...Lord God, make us whole: help us to hear and to speak clearly -- so that your Kingdom may come -- through Jesus Christ our Lord.